

## Passion, care, and eros in the gendered neoliberal university

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### Abstract

In this article, we respond to Bell and Sinclair's (2014) call for reclaiming eros as non-commodified energy that drives academic work. Taking our point of entry from Institutional Ethnography (IE) and the standpoint of junior female academics, we highlight the ambiguity experienced in the neoliberal university in relation to its constructions of potential. We elucidate how potential becomes gendered in and through discourses of passion and care: how epistemic and material detachment from the local is framed as potential and how masculinized passion directs academics to do what counts, while feminized and locally bound care is institutionally appreciated only as far as it supports individualized passion. The way passion and care shape the practices of academic writing and organize the ruling relations of potentiality is challenged through eros, an uncontrollable and un-cooptable energy and longing that becomes a threat to the gendered neoliberal university and a source of resistance to it. By distinguishing between passion, care, and eros, our IE inquiry helps to make sense of the conformity and resistance that characterize the ambiguous experience of today's academics.

Key words: university, passion, care, eros, potential, gender, resistance, Institutional Ethnography

Emma Bell and Amanda Sinclair (2014) called for reclaiming eros as energy rather than a sexualized commodity. They argued that eros "is manifest when 'sharing deeply any pursuit with another person' or experiencing a 'fearless' and embodied capacity for joy; or the deep feeling that may be present when writing or exploring an idea" (p. 269). Bell and Sinclair proposed that eros reveals the gendered social organization of the university and helps unite "heart and mind, body and breath" in a search for a better world where embodied forms of writing have the potential to transform social structures and conventions.

In this paper, we explore the relationship between passion, care, and eros in the neoliberal university (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). We study eros as longing for learning and making sense of the world, for becoming a whole human being, and for engaging with others in this pursuit and as actions that interrupt the ruling orders. In the neoliberal university, this is no mean feat: managerialism reigns, jobs are precarious, and work is meticulously surveilled (Gill, 2009). A competitive ethos has taken over in academia (Kallio, Kallio, Tienari & Hyvönen, 2016). We argue that while passion and care may sometimes be confused with eros in this context, they are reduced versions of it (cf. Bell & Sinclair, 2014; Clarke, Knights & Jarvis, 2012). Passion and care are able to coexist with university management discourse and to serve institutional interests that are not necessarily conducive to a longing for knowledge and growth. Eros, in contrast, exists independently of whether it is recognized, rewarded, or appreciated by dominant institutions. In the experience of academic work, eros is manifest as longing that cannot be captured in or reduced to managerialist discourse and homogenous gender orders; it represents an act of identifying, subverting, and surpassing dominant quality and excellence standards as well as gender stereotypes and hierarchies. By juxtaposing eros with passion and care, we explicate the ambiguities of conformity and resistance in the neoliberal university.

We build on research where academic standards of quality and performance and the construction of merit that they engender are criticized from feminist perspectives (e.g. Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Bailyn, 2003; Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Fotaki, 2011, 2013; Harding, Ford & Cough, 2010; Gill, 2009, 2014; Katila & Meriläinen, 1999; Krefting, 2003; Lund, 2012; Morley, 1999; Parsons & Priola, 2013; Thomas & Davies, 2002; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2013). This research has illustrated how discourses of merit and gender are mutually constitutive and how the evaluation of merit in universities is based on taken-for-granted gendered assumptions about

what constitutes the ‘ideal’ worker (Acker 1990) or, indeed, the ‘ideal’ academic (Harding, Ford & Gough, 2010; Lund, 2012). It is argued that neoliberal policies and measures that make people, departments, and universities measurable, accountable, and comparable on so-called neutral and objective standards contribute to reproduction of gender inequality (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Morley, 1999). It is further argued that disembodied standards conceal the gendered division of labor at the university and in the home (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Brabazon, 2014; Fotaki, 2013) and that these standards disregard how the masculine values, practices, and discourses on which the prevalent notions of quality and merit are based systematically place women and the feminine in disadvantageous positions relative to men and the masculine (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2013). The neoliberal university, then, is unashamedly gendered.

We complement the literature by bringing out the ambiguities of conformity and resistance in the experience of junior female academics. In offering a new perspective on how academics are evaluated by both themselves and others, we focus on potential rather than merit (Adkins & Jokinen 2008) and specify how potential is defined and enacted in and through passion and care. While merit is typically conceptualized as the accumulation of past achievements, potential is oriented towards the future (Parker & Weik, 2014). To evaluate potential is to evaluate whether a person has the right traits and attitudes for future performance; it is elusive. We argue that for achieving recognition as a junior with the potential to become the ‘ideal’ academic, the individual must strive to live up to standardized quality criteria *and* frame her choices and pursuits as driven by passion. Potential expressed through this discourse becomes a tool with which individuals rather than institutions can be held responsible for success and failure. In moving beyond it, eros appears as resistance in the gendered neoliberal university. In addition to

collective and conscious responses to power and control, resistance can take place at the level of subjectivity (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Thomas & Davies, 2005) and it can reside in the eye of the beholder (Prasad & Prasad, 2000). Eros seeks transformation and surpassing of the existing orders, but within the neoliberal university it shows itself in acts of resistance.

Applying the standpoint feminist epistemology, concepts, and methodological procedures of Institutional Ethnography (Smith 2005), we illustrate how passion, care, and eros play into the ‘ideal’ academic and make the concept ambiguous. IE is a method of inquiry for exploring how translocal ruling relations are enacted in local settings, uniting various settings and people across place and time. Local enactment necessarily involves interpretation, translation, and adaptation, however, and it always includes the possibility of resistance (cf. Ranking & Campbell, 2006; Griffith & Smith, 2005). Drawing on empirical materials from four years of field work at Aalto University in Finland, we analyze how, from the standpoint of junior female academics, dominant ways of knowing quality, excellence, and potential in writing for publication are shaped in gendered discourses of passion and care and disrupted by eros. We argue that ruling relations are established and subverted in the ongoing struggle between passion, care, and eros. As such, our study has implications for exploring conformity and resistance in the experience of academics in conditions of neoliberalism more generally.

After this introduction, the paper is structured into five sections. First, we outline IE as our method of inquiry, introduce the standpoint of junior female academics, and locate our study in its context. Second, we elucidate gendered passion and care, and highlight how these arise in the experiences of junior female academics. Third, we consider eros as a threat to the neoliberal university. Fourth, we discuss our key findings in the light of extant theory. Finally, we reflect on our study and the crafting of this paper.

## Theoretical and methodological framework

### *Institutional Ethnography and feminist standpoint*

Studies on gender in academia can be located within different ontological and epistemological traditions, informing how gender is conceptualized and what methodologies are employed in studying it (Fotaki, 2013). We draw on the conceptual and methodological resources of Institutional Ethnography (IE) developed by the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (2005). IE can be described as a theorized practice for mapping the social organization of everyday life (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). It was developed as a method of inquiry for exploring how concepts, abstractions, discourses, ideologies, and procedures for action organize experience and social relations (Smith, 1990a; 1990b; 2009). In line with the standpoint feminist tradition (Harding, 1993, 2007; Haraway, 1988), Smith suggests that we begin our inquiry from a subject position or *standpoint* within social relations.

IE offers great promise for organization and management studies (Calás and Smircich, 2006), although examples are not as yet plentiful. Rankin and Campbell (2006) studied managerialism in care work from the standpoint of nurses, Weigt (2006) explored welfare reform from the standpoint of single mothers, and Griffith and Smith (2006) examined middle class mothering discourse in the organization of public education from the standpoint of mothers in different social positions. IE studies share a focus on how people experience their everyday lives and how these experiences are shaped in a complex of social and ruling relations. They also share the conviction to talk back to power and institutional orders. As such, IE offers a way to explore conformity and resistance in people's everyday lives from a critical perspective.

In keeping with IE, we analyze experience as shaped in social relations and consider it *work knowledge*; that is, everything people do in and with their bodies that takes time, effort, and emotions as they participate in (re)producing and subverting institutional orders. Our exploration starts in a specific *local* setting (time and place) where people carry out their activities such as academic writing. In mapping this concrete activity, the institutional ethnographer remains open to how it is coordinated in sequences of action and relations with people located elsewhere and elsewhen. Local activity hooks people into *translocal* social relations. Some of these relations are text mediated and text coordinated; they are what Smith (2005) calls *ruling relations*, which carry concepts, categories, procedures, discourses, and ideologies across time and space. These relations come in the form of laws and regulations (e.g. laws on higher education, contract agreements, organizational policies and procedures) and hegemonic discourses (e.g. how quality is measured and how gender relations are organized). Ruling relations shape the embodied experiences of people. They are mediated directly or indirectly via texts that can be taken up, read, interpreted and/or resisted by different people in different places who coordinate their activities and hence make the institutional actionable.

We propose that IE and the standpoint tradition provide a useful point of entry for exploring academic work in the neoliberal university. IE is founded upon a feminist reading of Marxist epistemology and a critique of dominant epistemologies and processes of objectification within the social sciences. Critical potential derives from the situated knowledge of those whose experience has been devalued or made invisible within dominant institutions and institutional representations. As such, IE unpacks the systemic nature of inequality and makes alternative and devalued forms of knowledge and other ways-of-doing (academic) work visible.

To summarize, IE comprises three main steps. First, it starts from a standpoint within social relations and its related experiences and work knowledge. Second, it aims to understand how work knowledge is shaped in relationships with other people and locally occurring texts. Third, it aims to elucidate how these texts are hooked into translocally operating ruling relations; discourses, ideologies, and the like. Throughout the analysis, the institutional ethnographer returns to the standpoint to ensure that we do not lose sight of people's experiences and work knowledge. In and through IE we are able, first, to map processes that coordinate people's activities, make institutional intentions actionable and hold people accountable and, second, to make visible how people resist ruling relations.

### ***Mapping the social organization of junior female academics' experiences***

The standpoint of junior female academics at Aalto University in Finland is our point of entry for elucidating social and ruling relations and resistance to them. At the time of the study, these people were in the final stages of their PhD studies, in a temporary post-doc position, or employed on a fixed term lecturing or project researcher contract with no certainty of future employment. They would all define themselves as critical scholars, although this means different things to different people. In order to map how the experiences of junior female academics were shaped, the first author generated various empirical materials. She produced approximately 100 pages of field notes from observational participation (Moeran, 2009) over a period of approximately four years starting from September 2010. Together with a variety of policy and organizational texts, these field notes serve us in understanding the neoliberal university as it takes form at Aalto. They also show how strategic changes were translated and enacted in the everyday life of particular local settings (departments) across the university. These materials help us to analyze interviews with junior female academics and provide insight into their everyday

activities, experiences, and struggles between longing for knowledge, learning, harmony and non-instrumental connections, on the one hand, and pressures to conform to certain standards of quality and excellence, on the other.

The first author is herself a junior female academic. She came from outside Finland in 2010 to pursue her PhD in the newly merged Aalto University, with no experience of its predecessor organizations. Over the years, she carried out in-depth interviews in English seeking to illuminate the link between local lived experience and the translocal ruling relations (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). The interviews allowed her to explore how concrete texts – as mediators of discourses, standards of quality and knowledge production – shaped the experience of article manuscript ‘production.’ The second author is a senior male academic who first served as a sparring partner in discussing the changing university and then engaged with the first author in discussing the empirical materials and in writing this paper. He was a professor at Aalto University when the empirical study was conducted.

The first author conducted interviews with 35 people, located differently within Aalto University. Each interview lasted between 90 minutes and three hours, and some people were met for two or three interviews. Most research participants were junior female academics, but also male and female professors as well as academic and administrative managers were interviewed. The interviewees were from different departments at Aalto. Their workplaces varied, but the majority were from units where women were relatively well represented and there was at least some awareness of gender-related issues.

The first author transcribed all interviews. On the basis of the textual clues offered in interviews and observational situations, she located dominant texts and mapped links between them. These



texts include Aalto strategy and tenure track documents as well as transnational texts such as university and journal ranking lists and indexes. In keeping with IE, texts became the observable link between local ambiguities – struggles between conformity and the yearning for knowledge and growth in the face of standardization of performance measures – and translocal connections and shifts involving particular notions of academic excellence and quality. This made it possible to make sense of how people's experiences are organized and coordinated by the ideological codes, discourses, and ways of knowing mediated by texts that they read, encounter (e.g. through participation in meetings and other events), interpret, activate, resist, and reject.

In the accounts of junior female academics, passion, care, and eros emerged as coordinators of social relations. We located discourses of passion and care in organizational and policy texts, and learned how the former was elevated and the latter downplayed in representations of quality and excellence and the 'ideal' Aalto academic. We use the term 'ideal' academic to denote the (assumed) qualities necessary in showing potential to advance in Aalto's tenure track system. This is based on Acker's (1990) concept of the 'ideal' worker, which comprises gendered assumptions of full-time availability for work and constant mobility. We noticed that in constructing the 'ideal' Aalto academic, being passionate resembled the highly enthusiastic and uncomplaining subject that McRobbie (2016) talks about in her studies of the so-called creative industries. Passion worked to normalize the intense and precarious individualized work. Care, in turn, referred to acts of kindness and generosity towards others (Gill, 2009) that, despite some ceremonial rhetoric, remained unrewarded in Aalto's academic system.

We located how these discourses coined forms of potential at Aalto and detailed how they related to accounts by junior female academics of their own experiences. We discerned how gender acquired specific meanings in the discourses. We sought to understand how gender as

ways of knowing and doing masculinity and femininity within a system of heteronormativity was taken up, negotiated, and applied by women (and men) onto themselves as well as others (Smith, 2009). While passion reflected masculine individualism, care was associated with feminine community. Engaging with Bell and Sinclair (2014) and Clarke et al (2012) then enabled us to place discourses of passion and care in relation to eros and to bring forth ambiguities in how junior female academics experienced their work.

Guided by what we learned from the experiences of junior female academics, we revisited classic understandings of eros. Eros – often referred to in association with philosophies of love – was debated in Plato’s Symposium. Here it was understood as human drive and longing for knowledge, the yearning to make sense of the world and oneself in it (cf. Levy, 1979). While eros is often understood as the ‘will to live’ within psychoanalysis, or akin to desire for recognition from the ‘Other’ (or what we suppose the ‘Other’ desires) in Lacanian thought (Miller, 1998), we interpret it as the drive to bring harmony to our lives, to connect with others and to make sense of body, mind, feelings, and our being in the world; to move beyond a state of chaos by naming it, providing categories, values, order, and synthesis. This longing for consistency and harmony is driven by ideals of what constitutes the ‘good’ and the beautiful in the pursuit of knowledge.

From its origin in ancient Greek thought, then, eros can be thought of as an embodied *longing* as well as energy – a longing for the pursuit of ideas, an intimate relation with the world, with ourselves, and with other humans that we can never possess or achieve, but which nonetheless drives us. This longing and energy (in one form or the other) belongs to all, and surpasses any gender identity, gender dichotomy, and ideological order. Our understanding of eros thus comes close to how the African-American feminist theorist and activist bell hooks (2000) views love as

something one does rather than feels: love is the willingness to extend oneself to nurture one's own and another's growth, and this includes choice and intention. Love is "a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect" (hooks, 2000: 7-8). Hence, while love involves care as the ability to "give and receive attention, affection, joy," loving oneself and others requires radical transformation of an *environment* (hooks 2000: 53). Eros as love can thus transform our practices of writing and enable the exposure of our vulnerability as writers without significant risk (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018). Such forms of writing can be seen as enacting eros because they surpass the ideological orders that restrain us and our relations to others in academia. Eros is a longing for transformation. However, we suggest that the transforming potential of eros is often reduced to resistance within neoliberal academia and that resistance is no guarantee of transformation. Overall, we use eros as an uncoopted word for energy and longing that powerfully organizes and coordinates accounts and experiences of interrupting the gendered neoliberal university.

Explicating the interplay between passion, care, and eros enabled us to illustrate the complexity of junior female academics' experiences and to locate settings (departments) within the university where eros could take different forms. In keeping with the definition of work in IE – as everything people do when they reproduce or resist institutional orders – we theorize passion, care, and eros *as* work and different forms of work knowledge. Engaging with our research participants taught us what this work knowledge consists of. IE allowed us to both map what is contextually specific and to show how it is hooked into the translocal. Hence, while our findings are situated in given local contexts within Aalto, they are likely to be recognizable beyond its borders because the particular forms that passion and care take and the forms that eros

takes in response to them are shaped within the translocal ruling relations of neoliberal universities across the world.

### ***Making a “world class” university***

Finland’s higher educational system offers a particular setting for our inquiry. Finnish universities have over the last twentyfive years been redefined into systems with inputs, throughputs, and outputs that need to be monitored and measured for performance in accordance with international and increasingly standardized evaluations and accreditations (Aarrevaara, Dobson, & Elander, 2009; Aula & Tienari, 2011; Kallio et al, 2016). As a Nordic country, Finland has prided itself on a high level of education available to all citizens regardless of wealth or family background. Access to free higher education was a characteristic feature of the welfare-state model practiced in Finland until the 1990s. The State provided the funding for universities and dictated their mandate. A new performance-oriented approach to managing Finnish universities was first adopted in 1995, bringing about a gradual shift towards a market-oriented model. A radical change occurred in 2009-2010 when a new University Act and funding scheme were introduced (Välimaa, 2012). Legal and financial autonomy was granted to universities in order to diversify their funding base. In effect, universities in Finland were put in a position where they had little leeway in choosing *what* objectives they wished to pursue, although they now had more autonomy over *how* to achieve these objectives (Kallio, 2014). All this amounts to what we call the neoliberal university. While Finnish academia is still some way from the “deep sense of crisis” of autonomy and meaningfulness that is said to characterize universities in the UK (Gill & Donaghue, 2016: 91), recent changes have led to considerable insecurity among Finnish academics (Kallio et al, 2016; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

Another central feature in the latest reforms in Finland was a number of university mergers, the most significant of which combined the Helsinki University of Technology, Helsinki School of Economics, and Helsinki University of Arts and Design. The merger sought to create the basis for a ‘world-class’ university that would appear in the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education top 100 ranking list by 2020. The new private foundation-based institution was named Aalto University. Our site of research is this new university, which became a legal entity on January 1, 2010. In achieving its ambitious goals, it introduced a competitive, and in Finland unprecedented, US-style tenure track system (Herbert & Tienari, 2013). For legal reasons, all full professors on a permanent contract were transferred to the tenured positions. Others would live in uncertainty about their future, as all (new) positions were to be filled through open calls, meaning that all positions were advertised on international academic recruitment sites. While the junior female academics whose standpoint we took stood outside the tenure track, they all reflected upon which kinds of academic activities to engage in and whom to collaborate with in order to stand a better chance of securing a position in the new university.

Tenure track evaluation criteria were implemented with the purpose of finding the *best* candidates for the job and supporting those on the tenure track to realize their full potential (Herbert & Tienari, 2013). Recruitment to the tenure track and subsequent progress therein was to occur through “systematic evaluation” based on principles of “predictability, transparency and comparability with international standards,” as the system was described on Aalto’s website, with particular emphasis placed on publications in prestigious international journals. At entry levels (in hiring new first-term assistant professors or considering them for a second term) potential was to be more in focus than merit. Potential was to be evaluated on the basis of

excellent publications as well as a commitment to produce more publications in the future.

International collaboration and mobility would also be a key measure of potential.

## **Gendered passion and care in the neoliberal university**

### ***Point of entry: pressures of passion***

Organizational and policy texts frame Aalto University and its academics as driven by passionate pursuit of knowledge. As discourse, passion can be traced back to the textual complex in and around the university and its new tenure track system. Connected with the construct of the ‘ideal’ academic at Aalto there is a committed, focused, and exclusive passion that is highlighted. In response to the word passion, the internal search engine at Aalto returned over 4,600 hits. These include “*passion-driven research*,” “*passion-driven teaching*,” “*passion-based learning*,” “*academic work as a profession and passion*,” “*follow your passion*,” “*entrepreneurial passion*,” and “*this university values passion for exploration*.” Aalto calls for passionately engaging with the institutional intentions of the university to become “*world class*.”

In explaining what drives her to write and publish articles, a postdoctoral researcher whom we call Susan expresses a disjunction. On the one hand, she tells us that her main driver is that something unexpected, unique, and counterintuitive will arise from her data; something that challenges existing knowledge and tells a story she would like to pass on to her research community. She expresses a longing to convey knowledge that she feels excited about and to contribute to making sense of the world. On the other hand, Susan says that she is motivated by the challenge of publishing itself. She sets high standards for the “*quality of the journal*” where she submits her work. When co-authoring manuscripts, up-front negotiation regarding where to publish has to take place in addition to a realistic evaluation of the quality of the qualitative data

in hand. In the “*A journals*” in which she aspires to publish, this is a question of volume. When writing for publication, Susan explains, it is important to remain sensitive to what counts as good research and writing in prestigious journals. In “*playing the game*” it is also important to know “*how far one can go*” in terms of criticality.

What is interesting about the type of disjuncture arising here is that it is not completely clear that Susan prefers one over the other; it is not clear that she struggles to balance what she *ought* to do with what she would *prefer* to do. Although she is well aware that there is no straightforward relationship between the position of a journal on a ranking list and the quality of the work published in it, Susan constructs the review processes in such journals to be of “*the highest possible standards*” and “*the best quality.*” This conviction leads her to aim for journals that do not necessarily share her epistemological and methodological commitments, and allows these to be reshaped.

Susan talks at length about the politics of writing for US-based “*A journals*” and shows full awareness of the epistemic struggles behind the standards these convey. She speaks about “*downplaying the social constructionist approach,*” and explains how one must avoid positions that are non-positivist and non-pragmatist: “*you know, ‘social construction of what?’ It’s their favourite thing to ask [...] it’s suicide you know.*” Susan tells us that there are a number of other conventions that shape the form and content of a manuscript, for instance, whom and what to cite. If you wish to be published in an “*A journal*” you must cite authors who are “*canonized*” there. Citing the right people signals competence. Susan says, however, that she and her co-authors sometimes cite “*ceremonially.*” This signals the ambiguity of Susan’s engagement with these journals. She does not buy into the discourse wholeheartedly, but calculates what she can do to get published without losing sight of her commitments and identity. While critical scholars

such as Özkazanc-Pan (2012) reflect on hostile reactions to critical work by editors and reviewers in top US journals, Susan talks as if she has already accommodated her qualitative research to fit their quality criteria. She talks as if she learned to deal more strategically with the compromises she makes with every experience in writing for publication. Susan also reflects openly on how her engagement with US-based “*A journals*” shapes how she evaluates the quality of others’ work.

Despite such compromising, Susan describes with great passion how her final and entirely transformed article manuscript, which was accepted for publication in a top journal, is her “*diamond*,” something “*precious*” to her as if it was her “*child*.” She conveys the discourse of passion when she describes her efforts in developing the paper and learning from editors, reviewers, and co-authors. Pressures for passion organize Susan’s work and mark an ambiguity in her experience, while the carework involved in dealing with the social dynamics in the author team, in finding time to see and talk to her colleagues and students while focusing on writing, and finding time to take care of herself and her family receives less emphasis. Susan’s experience connects with McRobbie’s (2016) analysis of passion as an expression of the depolitization and individualization of risk in the creative economy. Through policies and institutional practices people are encouraged to enter the thrilling world of knowledge production, but very little security is offered in return. Inability to get a contract renewed or to climb up the career ladder is blamed on personal lack of drive or passion, and this places women like Susan in a particularly vulnerable position.

While passion is elevated in relation to research in the strategy texts at Aalto, care is mainly discussed in relations between teacher and student. The feminine is ascribed some value and at first sight this would seem to benefit women. However, given the continued prevalence of



gendered assumptions and expectations within Finnish society and elsewhere, both men and women tend to consider women's engagement in caring as more natural (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999). Women's care work thus tends to be imperceptible until they fail to live up to the expectations. At Aalto, care as a central value balances out the competitive individuality that follows from the institutional promotion and activation of the passionate 'ideal' academic. It hides the fact that care is not equally distributed or rewarded. Care becomes the "housework" of academia that is associated with women (Brabazon, 2014: 61) and it facilitates exploitation of women's work in the interest of the university (Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Rowland, 2017).

The first author's field notes include numerous examples where the care work of junior female academics is not institutionally recognized and rewarded. This happens in department meetings and in performance appraisals with their bosses. The work that remains hidden includes putting extra effort into teaching students to be internationally oriented, courageous, passionate, and caring; taking on management roles in undergraduate and graduate programs; and spending time on emotional support of students and colleagues. Intense pressure to produce 'world class' research means less time for, and recognition of, everyday care work. One female professor whom we call Eva says she noticed that when very busy she has no time or energy to care for her PhD students and colleagues; she does not have time to discuss their work, encourage them, or provide emotional support. Eva says that she does not like herself when she is like that, and that she exerts a great deal of effort to "*get back to who she really is.*" Eva seems to develop a sense of guilt for not caring enough while passionately dedicating herself to her publications.

Eva's experience thus speaks to a feminist *ethic of care* as developed by Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan engaged with women in their everyday lives and spoke to them about incidents of injustice and carelessness. Gilligan pointed to a disjuncture between moral theories and women's

actual experience of moral conflict and choice, and developed an alternative ethic emphasizing relationality, voice, induction, and contextual sensitivity. Gilligan's ideas led to heated debates and controversies in relation to feminism and ethics (Davis, 1992). Her distinctions between women and men in their approaches to ethics could be misused to reproduce essentializing differences in moral reasoning, rather than bringing attention to power relations that give rise to accounts of gendered identity (Heyes, 1997). At Aalto, gendered stereotypes and expectations resulted in women as well as men reproducing notions that women hold particular moral responsibilities for which they are not rewarded.

### ***Away from home: exploring the ability for detachment***

The dominant institutional ways of knowing – evaluating and rewarding – quality and excellence in the neoliberal university seek to convey the impression of neutrality and objectivity (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001). IE helps us to see that while sometimes standardizing across time and space, and at other times invoking categories of difference in attempts to fulfil institutional intentions, ways of knowing are never adapted identically. Rather than being stable, they are interpreted and negotiated through local ways of knowing; interpretations that themselves (re)produce or subvert the social and ruling relations. Moments of (re)production take place in conferences, workshops, courses and meetings, via feedback from reviewers and editors, and in evaluating potential for the tenure track. One female professor at Aalto, Anna (pseudonym), shared her experience: *“Nowadays you need to have a certain publication record. [...] because now I sit in one of these [tenure track] committees... and I see there, very clearly, that citation index scores clearly play a role... a major role in candidate selection.”*

Anna's experience of writing for publication in the 'right' journals and learning to become mindful of the citability of articles reflects the ruling relations that shape the work of junior female academics. Anna, the senior scholar, tells us that specific publications (and the citations they attract) matter when candidates are evaluated for tenure track positions. Susan, the junior scholar, *must* focus on the right journals and accumulate a track record in order to demonstrate the potential that will secure her a position at Aalto. At the same time, publishing in the right journals involves detachment from ways of knowing quality that are fostered in one's local community. Due to the time-consuming nature of writing for these journals, it leads to a degree of detachment from those local responsibilities that do not count in performance evaluations. While this can never be fully achieved (if that were to happen, the university would collapse), it is easier for some than it is for others.

An individual's position within social relations shapes the extent of their ability for detachment. The detachment we speak of is not only or necessarily a physical one, but rather one which involves an international orientation that directs the choices academics make (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas & Davies, 2008). Displaying oneself as competently detached from the local while advancing one's career, is connected to performing a form of masculinity that is openly individualistic and aggressively competitive (cf. Connell, 1998). Within the context of the neoliberal university, this masculinity is coupled with the pursuit for excellence in shaping and defining what is worth being passionate about. The following quote by a junior female academic, whom we call Kate, illustrates this:

I felt really depressed and I didn't know what was going on because I always loved this thing you know [...] It was the culture in the way that everyone started to talk about

publications [...] I had to start thinking in terms of ... not just that I am doing this research because I love it but [...] I had to start thinking in political terms ... the game.

Kate's experience signals how she not only felt that she had to rethink her priorities. Her motivation for engaging in research, too, had to be geared towards participating in the academic market place. A number of female academics in our study spoke about the gendered nature of careerism and "*the game*" at Aalto. They referred to a society and university structured by heteronormativity and the relations of difference and hierarchy between the masculine and the feminine that it sustains. Eva (pseudonym) is a full professor who continues to struggle with gender stereotypes and gendered practices. In order to be considered a good academic she must perform masculinity, but to avoid being perceived as a "*careerist bitch*" she must also perform femininity: "*I think my gender has certainly NOT been an advantage because a woman who is outspoken is the worst thing in a community dominated by men um because you are a threat.*" Lisa (pseudonym) is a junior academic on a fixed-term contract. She recalls a seminar where her peers invited some of their senior colleagues to discuss the consequences of Aalto's new performance criteria. Lisa describes her experiences of "*not being good enough*" as deeply gendered:

The whole thing has a lot to do with gender. [...] I noticed that I can really relate to them a lot, because they have the same issues that I have had ... basically the whole time. They have children and they have a certain number of hours per day they can devote to this work and then comes all this measurement stuff.

These and other experiences recited by junior female academics suggest that hegemonic masculinity at Aalto pays little heed to the material and social conditions of academic work. It

builds on the assumption that passionate academics rid themselves of local attachments and responsibilities, and that they can dedicate their lives to ambitious research (Parker & Weik, 2014). Passion as an expression of structural and ideological changes manifests itself in a struggle to avoid displaying vulnerability in the university context that is increasingly defined by precariousness, disposability, and replaceability of workers (Gill, 2009). Enacting the masculine discourse of passion is connected with showing potentiality. This can also inflict injuries as men and women in the process of avoiding vulnerability may attach value to something that is harmful for themselves and their local attachments, as the first author's conversations with Eva and Susan demonstrate. While no journal review process is fully standardized or predictable, what is *done* to an article manuscript takes academics away from locally shaped epistemic, theoretical, methodological and other attachments and commitments, and into the (supposedly global) positivist realm, far beyond "*some minute little crowd*," as Susan puts it.

The discourse of passion downplays epistemic hierarchies. This is evident from the way in which discourses are activated when authors engage in an exchange of views with reviewers. Susan says: "*once you have learned it, it becomes easy to reproduce*." At the same time, any temptation to disagree with comments provided by editors and reviewers is to be kept at bay. The 'ideal' academic is passionately dedicated, but not in a manner that signals a lack of emotional control or the irrationality associated with hysterical femininity (Fotaki, 2013). "*Ceremonial*" or not, hard work by authors to make themselves acceptable to reviewers reproduces the hierarchical relation between different ways of knowing and doing research, reproducing one position as more scientific than the other. Susan ultimately succeeded in getting her article accepted for publication: "*This gave me the feeling ... I can do this. I know what the game is and*

*knowing that is as much as writing the work ... you sort of become socialized to the American A journal culture, for better or for worse.”*

### ***Gender and the distinction between passion and eros***

As a whole, displaying the ability to passionately detach oneself from the local and to engage with the global playing field does not serve the interests of junior female academics, who continue to have care commitments at both the university and home. There is a masculine order and taken-for-granted way of knowing that operates from within journal ranking lists and, more particularly, in efforts to publish in journals featured in the rankings. Both men and women can do masculinity (Halberstam, 1998), but within a heteronormative order of gender difference and hierarchy the expectations of femininity are placed on the sex-categorized women. It is easier for men to practice the kind of masculinity institutionalized at Aalto in ways that are recognized as potential. Many of our female research participants were convinced that men reserve for themselves more time to deal with review practices that are “harsher and more forbidding than those in the past” (Gabriel, 2010: 763). Engaging with these practices favors a particular form of aggressively passionate masculinity, which thrives on the individualization, intensification, and self-monitoring in neoliberal academic work (Gill, 2009).

Academic freedom *from* external constraints has turned into freedom *to do* something of (external) value (Marginson 2008). While this type of pressure is not at odds with passion, it is at odds with eros. Passion as a discourse is connected with the neoliberal, accountable, and individualized self (McRobbie, 2016; Skeggs, 2004). This alliance between passion and individualism obscures the fact that in practicing this exclusive passion and converting it into

something considered valuable by the university management, people are positioned differently within social relations. A junior female academic whom we call Lily puts it like this:

...research is what counts, and what you're supposed to do is you have to publish a lot in good, good journals of course. And, uh... mostly work with international colleagues [...] sort of understand the game and make extra efforts all the time. [...] I can see that people start doing this more kind of instrumental type of networking.

Academics at Aalto must be able to argue that their actions have arisen from passionate attachment to their work. The authority of neoliberal individuality would have us leave academia if we are unable to accept its drivers as if they were our own (Mäkinen, 2012; Skeggs, 2004).

Performance appraisal discussions and external career coaching services are offered at Aalto to help early career researchers identify their strengths and clarify their short- and long-term aspirations and goals and see that these contribute to the overall goals of the university.

Passionate academics signal potential because they need not be told what to do, how to do it, or when to advance the interests of the university. Potential rests in their covert individual capacity to engage with institutional intentions. A professor we call Liz expressed it like this: *“it no longer matters whether you are black or white, as the song says [laughs] what matters is that you are young and ruthless in living up to the university’s idea of excellence.”*

The coordinating power of passion flows from spaces in between the organizational texts that organize individual experience at Aalto. What constitutes passion becomes a space or a sheet to be filled in by drawing on other texts such as journal ranking lists and indexes, university newsletters, department emails, and events that praise particular kinds of activities as being the result of passion. Those who do not live up to these standards can be categorized as insufficiently

passionate and lacking potential. It became clear in the first author's conversations at Aalto that boasting plays an important role in communicating passion (cf. Billig, 2013; Lund, 2018). The competent boaster knows *what* to boast about, and *where* and *who* to. While in the discourse of passion, boasting is positioned as the unchallengeable right of the academic who has potential, it is deeply gendered. Boasting is gendered because it draws on aggressive individualistic masculinity and because men's boasting is more readily tolerated in academic communities, as Eva's experience tells us.

Overall, while passion is elevated, and care operates to camouflage the consequences of individualized passion, our analysis suggests that within the neoliberal university eros in the form of uncontrolled energy and longing has little space to flourish. While passion becomes a sign of potential and care is downplayed, eros (re)appears as resistance.

## **Eros as resistance**

Most junior female academics in our study had worked in the predecessors of Aalto University and they were used to a system where different ways of understanding and doing academic work were tolerated. They continued to engage in practices that now attained new meanings. As PhD students and as lecturers and postdoctoral researchers in fixed-term positions, junior female academics would have to be asked to change their focus and ways of working in order to be eligible for the tenure track. The change had to emerge from their *own* passion to do what they should. As they did not dedicate themselves to such a change of their own accord, most junior female academics in our study felt they were seen by university management to have little or no potential.

## ***Engaging in counterhegemonic practices***



Along the dominant practices at Aalto, our research participants engaged in practices that appeared counterhegemonic in the neoliberal university. For example, they would spend a lot of time developing teaching activities and student learning in their local communities, i.e. departments. While such care work was not institutionally recognized and rewarded, many of our research participants worked to ensure that students could be meaningfully educated and supported in their learning. A junior female academic we call Rose explained it like this to the first author: *“The number of female applicants to our undergraduate programs has decreased. This is what happens when you promote a super masculinist and competitive culture.”* Rose and others put a lot of time and effort into dealing locally with the consequences of such a culture. They tried to talk to heads of disciplines and departments about its negative effects and to support those students who were not comfortable with the new order. This meant dedicating less time to the kind of passionate academic writing celebrated at Aalto.

At the same time, our research participants aimed to publish in critical but not necessarily highly ranked journals, write books, book chapters and blogs, and publish work in Finnish rather than English. Demonstrating something akin to the ‘unconditional love’ of academics described by Clarke et al (2012), they longed to do the types of work that did *not* count. However, their unconditional love was not attached nostalgically to an understanding of what academic life was like before the neoliberal reforms and the merger. Instead, it pointed towards an opening for a different future, a *“third world”* (Irigaray, 2002). Rose explains the position of the university management:

It’s [their] narrow idea of what counts as a good academic [...] they see it as self-evident and unavoidable ... but, of course, *we* don’t take anything for granted ... being a superhuman is more difficult for some than it is for others.

By the notion of the “third world” Irigaray (2002) refers to what two or more people can create through insisting on love to depend on difference, mystery, and distance; *withness* above *sameness*. This is an unfolding and relational space in which we are open to each other – open to what we can learn from each other’s bodies, speech and silence – without losing ourselves. It involves the ability to become open to otherness and newness and to what they can tell us about ourselves. Longing for such spaces, junior female academics in our study were influenced by resources that were still available to them within institutional structures at Aalto. An example of this was a doctoral course in which the responsible senior male professor encouraged all participants to read up critically on the strategic (how), political (what), identity (who), and moral (why) dimensions of academic work and to reflect on their own practice (Räsänen, 2008). This course gave PhD-students a vocabulary for thinking about, analyzing, and discussing their own academic being and work in a manner explicitly critical of the neoliberal standards of quality and excellence. Those of our research participants who had taken the course told the first author how it helped them to find meaning in working and collaborating with others in ways that would not run counter to their own ideas and ideals.

A course on academic writing, in turn, enabled junior female academics to focus on writing in non-instrumental ways. In contrast to the heroism of the discourse of passion at Aalto, the professional writing coach responsible for the course encouraged participants to look at their writing as a mundane activity. She sought to make vulnerability in academic work visible and to offer participants ways to deal with their own anxieties and fears in ‘producing’ text. Writing was discussed as a physical, sensuous, emotional, social, and identity-related activity rather than a purely intellectual pursuit aimed at publication in the right places (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018).

Admitting vulnerability as an academic writer in the face of intensified demands was a far cry from the passionate boasting nurtured in the dominant discourse.

However, the vulnerability of men is different from that of women (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999; 2002). In speaking out about their anxieties, women are often accused of bias, bitterness, or hysteria (Morley, 1999) and their views are ridiculed, marginalized, and silenced. As such, alternative writing can expose women, “and with this exposure, we get cast in a sea of risk, insecurity and vulnerability” (Pullen, 2018: 123). Junior female academics found safe spaces to share their writing experiences, to voice their vulnerability, and to connect their writing with creative self-expression and self-extension, rather than with institutionalized rules that induced anxiety. The writing course prompted agraphia writing groups where women and men would meet weekly in a supportive environment to set targets for their writing and to discuss how their writing develops. The participants sought to turn vulnerability into courage in and through their joint commitments (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018).

Junior female academics were, perhaps, enacting an ethic of care in that their moral actions centered on interpersonal relationships and showing compassion and empathy towards each other (cf. Gilligan, 1982). They were attentive to their mutual and even reciprocal needs and took responsibility for their collective learning by listening to each other (Tronto, 2005). Their ethics was grounded in an idea of freedom to engage in alternatives to that which they were dominated by (cf. Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). Following bell hooks (2000), we may even suggest that the junior female academics enacted an *ethic of love*. For hooks, care and love are not synonymous (like passion and love are not), and an ethic of love is even more far-reaching. It is a “return to love in the face of societal reticence and resistance” (Vachhani, 2015: 155), based on a commitment to develop socially just and collaborative communities. These communities can

consist of women and men as they nurture self-expression, self-extension, and wellbeing in ways that surpass any abstracted ideological scheme or discursive representation. In many ways they resemble the strategies of those feminist consciousness raising circles that originally informed Dorothy Smith's theorizing of standpoint in IE (Smith, 2005).

Feminist theory and critique enabled some junior female academics to express their conviction and energy. It helped them challenge the way academic writers learn to assume the normality of masculine notions of rigor and conclusiveness in 'producing' texts for publication (Phillips, Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). Some of our research participants found ways to write in this spirit, and challenged their sense of vulnerability. They found concepts through which they could make explicit the hegemonic masculinity penetrating the university and discussed these in reading circles with other junior scholars. They could also voice their concerns and ideas in seminars and departmental meetings. Some got involved in an anonymous blogging collective called *Tiina Tutkija* (Tina the Researcher). The first author knew the identity of the bloggers because they contacted her via email. She met with one of them (a junior female academic) who explained:

I read a couple of good articles and I decided to start a blog... A lot of people were then enthusiastic about it, and I saw how empowered colleagues around Finland felt when someone said these things out loud. [...] The managerialist rhetoric is very silencing ... and they [Aalto University] are hysterical about reputation building. [...] The blog is very much a counter story and it is not possible to silence it.

*Tiina Tutkija* operated anonymously throughout 2013 until the bloggers decided to leave Aalto University. They made a total of 135 posts using the term "*Top University*" as Aalto's alter ego. They drew on critical higher education studies, critical organization and management research

published in journals such as *Organization*, Finnish working life research, and feminist theory. By quoting “*Top University*” documents and transnational texts on university rankings, and drawing on critical research to make visible and challenge the assumptions underlying these texts, the *Tiina Tutkija* collective offered their readers opportunities to reflect on their anxieties and fears in the neoliberal university. The knowledge drawn on and the form of irony nurtured were widely shared among our research participants.

### ***Energy, longing, and resistance***

The practices described above not only ran counter to the hegemonic order at Aalto University, but involved a fearless pursuit of ideas and ideals that junior female academics believed in. Engaging in these practices were expressions of eros (Bell & Sinclair, 2014). Eros appeared in alternative ways of producing and communicating knowledge and nurturing an academic identity that subverted dominant institutions. Eros not only appeared as energy, but as longing for knowledge, spiritual growth, and engagement with others in the pursuit of harmony between the sense of academic self and action. In the eyes of Aalto’s management, eros was potentially dangerous because it contained a form of energy and drive that produced something different and unpredictable that might undermine the university’s institutional intentions to become ‘world class.’ Hence, in the counterhegemonic practices described above, eros took the form of resistance.

Eros as energy and longing for transformation and surpassing ideological orders is reduced to resistance within the neoliberal university. Hence, while resistance may be an essential part of transformation, it is not in itself transformation. Eros drives us to seek out radical change and carves out an opening towards a “third world,” as Irigaray (2002) argues. This involves a space

for relating to and acknowledging the ‘Other’ and oneself in ways that surpasses assigned identity categories and instrumental performance requirements. This entails a form of love. In distinguishing between care and love, hooks writes: “We are not born knowing how to love anyone, either ourselves or somebody else. However, we are born able to respond to care. As we grow we can give and receive attention, affection and joy. Whether we can learn how to love ourselves and others will depend on the presence of a loving environment” (hooks 2001, 53). Fostering eros and a transformation towards a “loving environment,” which stands in opposition to sexism, exploitation and self-rejection, may involve awareness and critique of ruling relations but, unlike care, it ultimately surpasses them.

At Aalto, eros was reduced to resistance towards ruling relations of quality and excellence as well as the masculinity that these relations drew on and sustained. Junior female academics sought to move closer to a sense of harmony between their experience of the world and the way in which it was represented. Eros played a significant role when they positioned themselves as competent *critical* scholars. Overall, eros could (still) be part of the local social relations that shaped our research participants. Their experience shows how the local setting of academic work shapes the possibilities for eros and expression thereof. For example, some of the local units (departments) on which the first author focused her fieldwork had a history of engaging with gender research and to some extent with feminist literature (Henttonen & LaPointe, 2010).

While some of our research participants such as Susan managed to navigate the institutional apparatus of Aalto, eros would be ignored or considered a sign of incompetence. One junior female academic suspected that decision-makers think that “*the only reason why we are critiquing the Aalto regime is that we aren’t good enough to make it there ourselves.*” In the dominant discourse, women were at fault rather than the gendered system (Brabazon, 2014). As

such, eros put one's job opportunities at risk. Despite the existence of (critical and feminist) alternatives and practices of resistance (creating spaces to support each other, using irony, writing otherwise), junior female academics could not help being held accountable to the ruling relations of quality and excellence. Even if some departmental tenure track evaluation committees supported the candidacy of applicants with alternative approaches, higher level committees overruled the proposals if the candidates lacked publications in the right journals. Some research participants told the first author that they did not even bother to apply, because they "*knew*" that they would not be considered.

The blogger collective *Tiina Tutkija* posted its last blog in December 2013. Their legacy is some 77,000 visits to the site – an incredible number for a Finnish-language scholarly blog. While *Tiina Tutkija* received a lot of praise from junior female academics as well as others, their message did not have a tangible effect on institutional practices at Aalto. The criteria of quality and excellence were not revised. Some of the junior female academics whose standpoint we took decided to opt out. They realized that what they longed for could not be fulfilled within the institutional confines of the gendered neoliberal university. These women decided to leave Aalto and to take their potential to new contexts where they hoped to contribute to knowledge in ways that could offer an alternative to the masculine order.

How about Susan? While she is aware of the hegemonic (and to some extent artificial) quality criteria that condition her choices, she engages with policy and organizational texts in ways that conform to these criteria. By passionately practicing analytical detachment (Parker & Weik, 2014) Susan avoids the display of making a choice between what she *ought* to do and what she *feels* like doing. Her reflexivity can yet be seen as a form of resistance connected to the construction of academic competence: the ability to critically evaluate herself and the world

around her. Susan resists, but in a manner that does not openly challenge dominant norms and does little to affect the hegemonic order (cf. Contu, 2008). This is a form of resistance nevertheless because she does not buy into the system wholeheartedly and maintains an arm's length relationship with it (Westwood & Johnston, 2012). The changes that Susan is able to work for in her local context, enabled by the position she has gained through her publications, include support for PhD-students with alternative topics and social constructionist methodologies.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 1990a; 1990b; 2005; 2009) has enabled us to explore how potential becomes framed and gendered in and through discourses of passion and care in the gendered neoliberal university. Engaging with this underutilized method of inquiry in feminist organization and management studies (Calás & Smircich, 2006) has shown how organizational texts become active organizers of our everyday lives. The discourses and ideological codes they mediate shape the activities and priorities of academics. Our analysis from the standpoint of junior female academics has enabled us to show how eros as energy and longing becomes expressed vis-à-vis the ruling relations of quality and gender. As theorized practice (Campbell & Gregor, 2004), IE has encouraged us to respond to Bell and Sinclair's (2014) call for engaging with eros and exploring the experiences of those who enact it in academic work.

We offer three contributions on the basis of our study. First, we complement extant feminist research on gender in neoliberal universities. While earlier studies have illustrated the gendered nature of meritocracy, we have elucidated how potential comes to be defined and enacted in and through discourses of passion and care. IE has allowed us to show how epistemic and material



detachment from the local is framed as potential and how masculinized passion directs academics to do what counts in an individualized manner. Feminized and locally bound care is institutionally appreciated only as far as it supports individualized passion.

A particular form of passion is thus crucial for the demonstration of potential in the neoliberal university. It is part of the movement towards enacting the ‘ideal’ academic (Lund 2012) who both embraces gamesmanship (Macdonald & Kam 2007) and distances themselves from it. They orient passionately towards dominant notions of an excellent publication, while distancing themselves from it by claiming that their definitions of quality originate in an internal drive and passion for becoming the best they can (Parker & Weik, 2014). The organizing ability of passion is thus intensified by holding academics responsible for the work of interpretation (Andersen & Born, 2001): the ‘ideal’ academic not only identifies *what* is worth feeling passionate about, but knows *how* to practice their passion in a way that individualizes their pursuits, while hiding the ruling relations of quality and gender that shape the passion.

Following McRobbie (2016), passion can be understood as a neoliberal delusion where people’s affective attachment to work is used to normalize precarity. At the same time, discourse of passion involves disavowal of social and collective engagements while perpetuating individualization. Passion in neoliberal organizations, then, replaces job security and operates as a means of production where workers are programmed to be enthusiastic and uncomplaining (McRobbie, 2016). Passion, and to some extent care, mystify the sources of what is deemed valuable academic work; they individualize and depoliticize talk about quality and excellence and help maintain a discursive framing of the university as a place more concerned with knowledge than its ranking in global league tables. The neoliberal university thus hides its paradoxes under the universal discourse of passion (and appropriation of care), whereby “the less

local loyalty and solidarity” academics show, “the better their prospects will be” (Parker & Weik, 2014: 174).

As such, the neoliberal university is fundamentally gendered. Women academics face permanent tension between their association with locally bound (care) roles and responsibilities and the pressures to live up to translocally operating masculinist demands on the ‘ideal’ academic. They carry the burden of sacrificial ethos on their shoulders (Gill, 2009) and a dual presence or double standard conditions their experience (Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991). When women challenge the gender order (and the masculine discourse of excellence) they are seen to invoke stereotypical articulations of femininity (Parsons & Priola, 2013) or to trespass gender stereotypes and considered to be “bitches” (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999). Either way, they can be written off for lack of potential. We have highlighted ambiguities with regard to conformity and resistance from the standpoint of those whose experience is devalued within dominant institutions and institutional representations, i.e. junior female academics. These women are in a particularly vulnerable position in terms of neoliberal constructions of potential, and it is through their experience that we can appreciate the complexity of conformity and resistance.

Second, and following from the above, we offer insights for exploring eros and resistance in the neoliberal university. We view eros to be about the pursuit of ideals of knowledge and harmony, as ends in themselves. This understanding of eros is incompatible with neoliberal academic order, which celebrates competition above knowledge and individuals above community (Badiou 2012; hooks 2000). Bell and Sinclair (2014) argue that academic work shaped by neoliberalism has become increasingly disembodied and commodified and that there is a disharmonious relationship between institutional representations of academic work and the values and ideals of those who do it. While Bell and Sinclair (2014) suggest a return to the energy of eros as a way to

reclaim a sense of meaningfulness in academic work, our study extends the inquiry by distinguishing between passion, care and eros, and by explicating the gendered and unequal distribution of these (cf. Jonasdottir & Ferguson, 2014). Passion and care play a significant role in research and teaching and may be internalized by academics as part of their identities at a given time and place (Clarke et al, 2012).

However, our analysis suggests that while passion and care may be dimensions of eros, they are not eros. Unlike eros, passion and care can be co-opted to play a significant role in how the neoliberal university is promoted and managed, thus reproducing gender orders and epistemic hierarchies. We argue that separating eros from passion and care enables us to identify the potential for resistance (if not transformation) in the neoliberal university. In so doing, it is also essential that we conceptually separate eros from resistance. This means that the ethos driving an alternative way of understanding and doing academic work is rooted in eros rather than conscious, collective, and organized resistance. It is through eros that the neoliberal university can be challenged in practice.

Universities are a specific context for understanding resistance, because academic work as it is conventionally seen involves a degree of analytical distance and reflection. This disposition is expected of the ‘ideal’ academic even when conforming to standardized criteria of quality and excellence (Herbert & Tienari, 2013). Prichard and Willmott (1997: 262) note that academics “resort to a variety of local tactics to evade and subvert as well as to accommodate and appease” managerialist demands, while Anderson (2008: 267) show how academics routinely “subvert the intention of managerial practices.” Dissent is in this sense institutionalized in academia, although the degree to which it is considered acceptable by university management may have been lessened as academics today are held accountable to externally defined demands (Marginson,

2008; Wright & Shore, 2017). Resistance is thus never disconnected from the discourses and practices it speaks or acts against; it is in itself shaped by institutional and ruling relations.

Resistance is traditionally understood as collective, conscious, and organized responses to power and control, implying a degree of antagonism and conflict. It is thus clearly distinguished from compliance and conformity. However, more generative understandings have also been put forth. It is assumed that resistance can be detailed, varied, subtle and contextual, and that there is considerable ambiguity and complexity surrounding it (see e.g. Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kondo, 1990; Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Resistance can be located at the level of subjectivities as it is related to how individuals come to know and challenge the ways in which their identities are constituted in hegemonic discourses. In Susan's experience of academic writing and publishing in our study we can see the complex relationship between ambiguity towards the ruling relations of quality and awareness of the political and epistemic struggles hidden behind these. While in some instances it would seem that Susan's awareness translates into cynical calculation, in others it becomes a point of entry for a carefully managed form of institutionalized dissent (Hirschman, 1970), subtle resistance (Kondo, 1990), counter identification (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996), or "mere performance" of "appropriate behavior" (Westwood & Johnston, 2012: 787). Susan is reflexive about her choices and she displays resistance at the level of her academic subjectivity, but these do not translate into counterhegemonic practice. While her experience may be perceived as a form of resistance it is not an expression of eros. This is resistance in spirit, not in speaking out.

Different theoretical positions on resistance force us to think what counts as resistance *and* eros, and why. Parody, irony, satire, and sarcasm amount to what Contu (2008) calls "decaf resistance" that threatens nobody and makes it possible to "enjoy without the costs and risks

involved” (ibid.: 370, 374). Contu suggests that such transgressions are futile as they contribute to the efficacy of the ideology that sustains neoliberal capitalist relations rather than challenge it. In the light of IE, resistance can be understood as acts of speaking out against disjunctures between one’s experience of the world and the way one is represented in and by dominant institutions and hegemonic discourses. Seen in this way, resistance always refers to an institution and speaks against texts that coordinate people’s actions. In order to resist, then, one must in some way know the ruling texts and find alternatives to them. We argue in the spirit of IE that resistance is distinct from eros, which exists regardless of context and circumstances and suggests an opening beyond discourse and ideology.

We further argue that eros differs from passion and care, which are contextual; the object that passion and care are directed towards is dependent on particular circumstances. They are not separated from concerns about outcomes such as rewards, and they are exploitable in realizing the institutional intention of the neoliberal university to become excellent or ‘world class.’ On the one hand, passion for one’s work and a sense of caring keep academics going despite insecurity, stress, precariousness, and exploitation (cf. Clarke et al, 2012; Knights & Clarke, 2014). On the other hand, passion is central for the discursive framing of the neoliberal university *as if* it were primarily concerned with the pursuit of knowledge. This is part of the enchantment of (the discourse of) passion that is characteristic of neoliberal enterprise culture more generally (McRobbie, 2016). Eros as longing and uncontrollable energy unveils this and calls it into question.

Eros may take the form of resistance in as far as it helps us get closer to a sense of harmony between our experiences of the world and the ways in which we are represented. Conversely, eros may be viewed as resistance by dominant institutions and in hegemonic discourses. Eros as

resistance, then, is in the eye of the beholder (Prasad & Prasad, 2000). It is about people's conscious or unconscious disidentification with the way they are represented in the neoliberal university, and about their attempts to articulate their work identity and practice in a way that displaces dominant representations (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). As our study of junior female academics demonstrates, eros is likely to come with a cost, but it can also offer an opening for a sense of recognition, meaningfulness, connection, harmony, and pursuit of knowledge. Most fundamentally, perhaps, eros as resistance within the neoliberal university remains a source of ambiguity.

Third, and finally, our paper demonstrates how Institutional Ethnography as a method of inquiry can be extended to the study of conformity and resistance in neoliberal organizations. In explicating how the social is organized in and through text-mediated ruling relations, IE has tended to focus on how people are held accountable to these relations (Smith, 2005). Much of IE inquiry acknowledges that resistance exists, but does not engage in explicating how resistance happens in the everyday lives of those whose standpoint it takes (Ranking & Campbell, 2006; Griffith & Smith, 2005). As they seek to avoid objectification and often treat IE as a distinct alternative sociology complete in itself, institutional ethnographers have also been skeptical of synthesizing their method of inquiry with other methodologies and theories. However, there is no way in which IE can fully escape processes of objectification; it will always provide a perspective and a set of concepts to explore how the social is organized (Walby, 2007). The concepts we have drawn on in this study (passion, care, and eros) to explore the experiences of junior female academics can be seen as an attempt at opening up social relations rather than prematurely defining them and concluding what they consist of (Addelsone, 1991). This paper is

thus a modest attempt to show how such engagement with theories of resistance may be valuable in bringing IE out of its own “institutional capture” (Smith, 2005).

## **Concluding remarks**

Our study takes its point of departure in Institutional Ethnography and distinguishes between passion, care, and eros. As such, it helps make sense of the conformity and resistance that characterize the ambiguous experiences of today’s academics. Since the field work and initial analysis was done, the two authors of this paper have both left Aalto University. The ideas behind this paper were grounded in the first author’s experience of a disjuncture between what she was expected to do in order to write a doctoral dissertation at Aalto and her feminist epistemic and theoretical commitments. After finishing her PhD she entered a fixed-term project researcher position at a university abroad. She sought to be part of an academic community that could offer her opportunities for collaboration in interdisciplinary questions of feminism, ethnography, and counterhegemonic knowledge production. The second author, a senior male academic, left Aalto because he felt he was becoming too comfortable in his position and needed a challenge. Unlike the first author, he does not share the experiences that we highlight in this paper. However, through the first author’s work he has found a new perspective to make sense of how he inadvertently contributes to the masculinist discourse of passion – and how he can move beyond institutionalized dissent to work for change in his local community.

These personal reflections lead us to consider whether writing this paper can be considered a form of resistance to the neoliberal university. One of the reviewers for this paper challenged us on this fundamental issue, and we are grateful for it. First and foremost, this paper aims at giving voice to junior female academics in their attempts to carve out spaces for defining a “third

world” (Irigaray, 2002). The hegemonic practices of academic writing at Aalto are very likely recognizable elsewhere, and we hope that our critique helps raise discussion across the world. However, against the backdrop of how we have defined resistance in the spirit of IE, writing this paper does qualify as an act of resistance. By expressing eros we are most probably seen by the university management to resist the criteria of quality that they have labored to put in place. Writing and re-writing this paper has thus become a “small episode of resistance” (Pullen, 2018: 127) that we hope helps others to find the confidence to point towards other ways of doing academic work and, ultimately, to embrace eros. As such, we have rendered ourselves vulnerable to criticism of our aims and means as academics. This has asked for courage, which we have developed from the experiences and accounts of those who we have studied – and which we hope many others will share.

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